

Third Installment Of This Year's Best Story

(Continued from Friday.)

CHAPTER V. The Night Rider.

HE light in the bungalow on the hill across the valley winked as some one passed beneath it and the window.

"I can see clearly enough," said Wilkerson, "that there is a girl mixed up in this affair. Tom Gallon never walked like that."

He rode slowly down the steep hill till he reached the pumping engine. Bill Tubbs, the bulky, sodden faced engineer, came to the doorway.

"Is this 'The Master Key'?" demanded Wilkerson.

"It certainly is," was the response.

"And—old Tom Gallon runs it?"

Wilkerson pulled out a flask, divining Bill Tubbs' ruling vice, and the engineer, after a long drink, wiped his mouth with the back of his oily hands.

"So you are looking for Thomas Gallon, are you? Well, he owns this mine, but it's mostly run by a young girl there in that bungalow on the hill. You see, Tom ain't up to what he used to be. The ore is getting worse every day and the old man's sick up there in his house."

"I'm going up to see him now," said Wilkerson. He rode on a few yards and surveyed the snug houses, stamp mill and all the apparatus of the growing mine and snarled: "So this is what he wanted for himself!"

The man he was seeking lay propped up in bed. To Ruth he gave everything—silk and down and all the soft things of this life. Himself he still slept on a hard cot with a straw pillow under his head—that is, he had slept. It seemed to him that sleep had forever fled, and he was now looking up into Ruth's face almost peacefully, trying to keep his grim old lips from asking sympathy. There was reason in his mind that he should accept no tender ministrations from the lovely girl who stood beside him. His sacrifice must be complete; so when his daughter bent over him and asked him if he felt all right he mustered a smile.

"There's nothing the matter with me, Ruth," he was saying, and his glance sought that of John Dorr, who stood at the foot of the bed. The eyes of the two men met, and Dorr imperceptibly nodded his head in token that he would not tell. Not that he yet knew the secret of "The Master Key," but he recognized the fact that sooner or later he was to know.

Ruth stooped over and said: "Papa, I don't believe you do feel well. I'm going to make you something hot to drink. I'll bring you a toddy." And she went into the kitchen and shut the door.

When she was gone John nodded a pleasant "Good night," and also left. Then old Thomas Gallon rose and went to his worn desk and got his well-thumbed diary.

"I am haunted," he wrote slowly, "always haunted. Am I to die without knowing whether Wilkerson is alive and that Ruth is safe?"

At that moment he glanced up and thought he saw the sinister face of his former partner at the window. By the strongest effort of will he managed to control himself and went on writing:

"Wilkerson still alive by night! When will he come out into the day? He shall never have the key that would unlock the secret to my little girl's happiness. I will trust John."

Fancy to yourself scenes that must have fled like swift films before the old man's eyes as he put the diary away. The desert and its mortal thirst; Wilkerson, ever drinking greedily of precious water; greed; murder; escape with the plans, their loss in the chest when the vessel went down in a caldron of flame; the image of his dying wife; the picture of the babe he had lifted from her chill breast—Ruth, for whom he had suffered. He bowed his head on his folded arms.

Such is the bitterness that the night brings upon those who are alone.

When Ruth came in with the steaming glass of toddy she quietly set the glass down and went out on the porch to look at the light across the gulch which marked John Dorr's window. Ruth was calling to youth.

It was no apparition that Gallon had seen at the window this time. It was really Wilkerson, who, after one satisfied glance, rode swiftly away.

It was midnight when he rapped at the door of the Valle Vista railroad station and called the sleepy agent.

"I want to get a telegram through right away," he said brusquely. "There is an extra dollar in your pocket if you rush it."

The slender boy who represented the Rocky Mountain Southern railroad sidled the way in, turned up the eck of the lamp and shoved blanks of pencil across the counter.

You look half asleep to me," Wilkerson growled as he picked up the pen.

The boy scanned the stranger quietly and opened the drawer of his telegraph desk and faced his visitor again. Wilkerson caught the glint of a steel barrel of a revolver in that drawer.

"You must have some money in the e," he snarled.

He looked at him with steely eyes and stated in a perfectly matter of fact tone: "I merely wanted to know you that I am awake." Their eyes met. It was Wilkerson's eyes.

He grasped the pencil and wrote on yellow blank:

Valle Vista, Cal., March 12.
Darnell, Astor House, New York City, N. Y.:
We found Gallon at last. Address "The Master Key" mine tomorrow.

He shoved the paper across to the operator and said roughly: "Now, earn that extra dollar!" He banged two silver coins on the counter.

The operator scanned the message, took another look at his customer and shoved one of the coins back.

"The charge to New York is \$1," he said mildly.

Wilkerson scowled. "Well, rush that anyway!" He strode out of the little office and mounted his horse. The weary animal tried to turn in toward its accustomed corral, but its rider reined it sharply back into the road toward "The Master Key" mine.

"I think Gallon will recognize me," he muttered to himself.

Tom Kane, who since the beginning of the camp had been the open handed but close mouthed cook, sounded his triangle.

Immediately poured out from the quarters of the unmarried men a stream of miners. As he had done for many years, Thomas Gallon went to the window to watch this morning ceremony. He saw that the men greeted John Dorr respectfully, yet generally.

"It was a lucky day when John Dorr came," he muttered to himself. Then his eye caught the figure of a horseman riding leisurely down the street, apparently careless of the scowls from the men against whom he brushed roughly.

The old man rubbed his eyes feebly and looked again. Yes, it was true. He could never mistake that figure or that saturnine visage. God! Why had he bullet not gone through that face? He reached for his gun with somewhat of the vigor of youth: he was safe now. One shot out of that window and that figure that had haunted him for years would tumble and fall and forever disappear from his life. He could do it.

He put the gun down quietly and dropped his chin on his breast. He realized that his years of struggle had broken down the indomitable spirit of his youth and his pride. He was an old man; he could not keep Wilkerson from coming back.

Harry Wilkerson saw that face at the window, and his smile hardened. He thought he would take Gallon by surprise possibly, but before he rapped



"Still partners in 'The Master Key.'"

on the redwood door Gallon had had time to clutch the key—"The Master Key"—to the riches in San Jacinto mine—and hurriedly thrust it into a drawer in the desk and shut it from sight.

As the door swung open the two men looked at each other. Then the younger man said softly, "Partner!"

"Partner?" said Gallon, as if incredulous. He called to his aid all his frail physical strength to face the final catastrophe.

"Still partners," said Wilkerson, stepping on in and closing the door; "still partners in 'The Master Key!'"

Involuntarily Gallon clutched at his throat, where that golden key hung so long. Could he live to fight this thing through? The agony in his chest was unbearable. "What do you want?" he asked hoarsely.

Wilkerson flung his riding coat on the table and pulled off his gaiters. "Well," he drawled, "partner, I guess there are several things I want." He fixed his dark eyes on the old man. "And there's one thing I'm going to have, and that's my share of 'The Master Key!'"

"Your share?" parried Gallon.

"My share," said Wilkerson, realizing that he controlled the situation. "I have returned for my just due!"

"Now, listen, partner, I am going to stand no nonsense."

"What have you been doing all these years?" the old man asked dully. "Why haven't you been here before?"

"None of your business," snarled Wilkerson. "All I've got to say is that I managed to get to New York. Now I'm back after finding out that you made a strike, the find you made when we were partners. How did you get back here?"

Gallon looked at his enemy with the simplicity of an old man telling a proved truth. "They were all my friends," he said.

"Friends?" said Wilkerson in a suddenly changed voice, and, thrusting his contorted face close to Gallon's, "I don't care about your friends, but you better care about the enemy you made."

For one instant the mine owner's face grew stern and pitiless. But he heard a step on the outside porch, and his face softened.

"My God, Harry; I did it for the girl!"

The evil soul of Wilkerson stared behind those cold eyes of his, and for the first time in his life he told the truth of his inmost heart. "And I must have my share of 'The Master Key' to buy a woman."

"What woman?"

Wilkerson leaned forward, and his lips hissed hate as he returned: "Do you remember that woman in Valle Vista five years ago—that woman you thought your little daughter too good to speak to? It was you who drove her out of camp, and now—she's rich and in New York, and she hates you!"

Gallon bowed his head.

"What is it you want, Harry?" he whispered huskily.

The other man pulled a paper out of his pocket and threw it on the table. "There's a contract for you to sign."

At this moment the door opened, and Ruth entered. She stared a moment at the visitor and then looked anxiously at her father, who said:

"This is an old partner of mine, Ruth—Harry Wilkerson."

Ruth shyly looked at the tall stranger and then shook hands with him. He held her gentle fingers a second too long. Her face flushed, and she retired without a backward glance.

Without paying any more attention to the old man, who had now subsided into a chair by the table, Wilkerson walked to the window and watched the slim, girlish figure of the young girl tripping down the hill. Then he swung on the old man harshly: "Well, I need a job. You need a new superintendent, don't you? I guess I'll take the place."

He stepped quickly to the window once more. This time he saw Ruth, with Tom Kane, the old cook, and another, in front of the cook house.

"Come here, Tom. Who is that talking to that girl of yours?" he said.

Gallon got up heavily from his chair and walked over to the window, and he could not repress an expression of relief. "Oh, that's the mining engineer of 'The Master Key,' John Dorr."

With a quick swing Wilkerson was back, leaning over the table. He picked up the paper. "Sign here!" he said insolently.

Gallon made a last faint protest: "I can't do it!"

Wilkerson picked up a pen, dipped it and put it in the old man's hand. "Sign!"

Just as the last letter of that signature, which had so long stood for respectability, was blotted at the foot of the paper Ruth entered.

"Your father has just made me superintendent of this mine. I'm his old partner, you know!"

Ruth looked at her father with consternation. "Why—why—I thought John—"

Thomas Gallon looked up and wiped his lips. "Yes," he said dully, "I have made my old—my old—partner superintendent of 'The Master Key.'"

"I expect we'll see a good deal of each other from now on," Wilkerson said slyly, and with those slim, white fingers of his he reached out and pinched Ruth's cheek.

Ruth did not draw back. She clinched her firm little hand and Wilkerson received a blow in the month that made him stagger back.

At the moment that he received that stinging blow he heard a movement to one side of him, and with the old instinctive fear of Thomas Gallon, he drew away back with his hand on the gun at his hip. He met the staring eyes of the old man, who had risen from his seat, and understood that until life left that decrepit frame its mastering passion—the passion which he could not hope to master—would be love for the girl whom he had just insulted.

He made a daring apology, the apology of the coward and the liar. "I beg your pardon, Ruth, but you used to sit on my knee when you were a little one."

She merely glanced at him and went out of the bungalow. She did not see her father rise to his full height and



"I can't do it!"

straighten his bent shoulders to say: "I killed you once for her sake, and, d—n you, I'll kill you again, old as I am!"

"Come on," Wilkerson said roughly,

"don't get excited. Now take me down and introduce me to the boys."

Gallon sighed heavily as he obeyed and took him to where John Dorr was now starting his day's work.

"John," he said heavily, "this is Harry Wilkerson, the new superintendent of the mine. He used to be my partner. It won't interfere with your work any." He paused for breath. "In fact, it will take a lot of extra details off your shoulders."

John looked at Wilkerson. His heart was filled with bitterness, but he simply said, "All right, Mr. Gallon," and left.

"Well," said Wilkerson, "I'll take charge right away." He picked up a telegraph blank and sat down at the desk with a new assurance. As if he had been dismissed by his superior, Thomas Gallon stepped feebly away.

When he was gone Wilkerson wrote rapidly: "Master Key Mine," via Silent Valley, March 12, 19—

Jeann Darnell, Astor House, New York City, N. Y.:
I have just been appointed superintendent of this mine; and George, letter follows.

HARRY.

He stared down at his own signature with a strange feeling that it was new—letters instead of figures! He winced as he seemed to hear her say: "I'll never marry you until you are rich. Get the money and you shall have Jeann Darnell."

The new superintendent gritted his teeth, folded up the telegram and called roughly to a boy lounging outside on the porch:

"Here, take this to the telegraph station, and be quick about it!" Then he addressed himself to an examination of the reports and time sheets and various papers that explained the working of the mine. His soft, white fingers caressed receipts that spoke of gold extracted from the earth.

CHAPTER VI. The Golden Key.

AFTER he had left his former partner in the office Thomas Gallon slowly went up to the bungalow. There was a glimmer of satisfaction in his dim eyes as he thought of the fact that the location of the real lode was unknown and that the plans that might reveal it were far beneath the waters of the Pacific. He went inside to the desk and picked out of the locker drawer the golden key which held his secret.

He stared at it and read the numbers that marked the position of the lost vessel, and the chest that held the plans. Whom could he trust with this? He looked out of the window and called to John Dorr.

"John," he quavered. "I've already told you a little about my finding this mine and about my old partner."

"Wilkerson?"

"Yes, Wilkerson; but there is another secret. I lost the location of the mother lode in a wreck at sea. The chest slipped overboard; but find the wreck and somewhere near it is that old carved chest, and when you open the chest—"

The old man suddenly staggered forward into Dorr's arms.

"I killed him once," he muttered feebly, and then the silence which presages the wordlessness of eternity overcame him. John gently laid him down on the bed and called Ruth.

"Father!" she called softly as she knelt by the bedside.

Thomas Gallon stood on the great divide, but he turned back a moment to gather his strength. Then he motioned with his gnarled hand for John.

The young man stepped quietly forward and stooped over.

"My will, John! I leave Ruth 'The Master Key.' In my desk—bring it!"

When the desired paper was brought he whispered:

"Read it!"

John Dorr opened the document and read it aloud:

"I leave all my property to my daughter, Ruth, to come into her full possession on her eighteenth birthday. I direct her never to let go of 'The Master Key,' which will make my little girl happy."

So ran the last words. The old man lifted himself still farther up and called for a pen and ink. Then, mustering his failing powers, he wrote in a firm hand the further words:

"I direct that my daughter keep Harry Wilkerson as superintendent until she is eighteen. I appoint as executor of this, my last will and testament, John Dorr."

THOMAS GALLON.

The pen fell from his fingers, and he lifted his trembling hand to his throat and tore at the string that held the golden key. It broke, and he put the key in Ruth's lap.

"That is the secret," he muttered. "John knows—and Wilkerson. Trust John." Again he opened his eyes and motioned toward the desk. "The letter!" he croaked.

Ruth's quick intuition led her to the desk again, and she found in the same drawer that had held the will a sealed envelope addressed:

John Dorr:
To be opened on Ruth's eighteenth birthday. Sooner if her welfare is threatened.

Gallon turned his dimming eyes to Ruth, who took both his chilling hands in hers.

"Child! 'The Master Key' keep all ways near you. Some day—he choked—"it will bring you riches, happiness and love!"

He thought; yet in the back of his consciousness was the realization that he did not know what disposition Gallon had made of the property. And where was that rich vein of gold that would buy him Jeann Darnell, with her velvet ways and her dark eyes of topaz?

Perhaps because for several years he had not handled other men, but been himself a mere cog in a great machine, Wilkerson mistook the spirit of the miners. He did not understand that they had a profound respect for Thomas Gallon.

"I must get these people in hand," thought Wilkerson, "and do it quick."

He spent the afternoon in making a schedule for a sweeping reduction in wages. Then he sent for Bill Tubbs, the engineer. When he had come, gross, liquor sodden and half insolent, the superintendent laughed at him.

"Tubbs, what do you know about this mine?"

"Well," Tubbs answered, "the ore panned out pretty good for awhile, but they lost the mother lode. There ain't a carload worth a dollar come out of here in three months, and that little girl up on the hill won't have nothing at all unless she takes the advice of some of us old timers and fires that young squirt of an engineer, John Dorr."

Wilkerson leaned over and his face suddenly grew white in its intensity of expression.

"I'm the superintendent of this mine. Now go!"

Tubbs looked astonished at the tone, but obeyed.

Wilkerson smiled to himself. One man, and he one of the most important in the camp, was his absolute tool and slave. He took his pen and rapidly wrote out an order:

"After this day all wages in this mine will be reduced 25 per cent."

He called one of the bookkeepers and curtly ordered him to post it on the wall of the office outside. A surprise awaited him, however, in the attitude of the miners. They paid no attention to the notice he had posted on the office wall, nor did they seem to recognize the presence of the new superintendent. He questioned Ed Mayer, the leading boss.

"Miss Ruth is running 'The Master Key,'" Mayer replied.

After the passing of Thomas Gallon things at the mine went very quietly for a few weeks. John Dorr had accepted the subordinate position under Wilkerson and was faithfully de-



He Jerked Wilkerson to His Feet.

voting himself in the intervals of his duties to soothing Ruth's grief. The girl had really been enormously dependent upon her father. She was only a child, but now in her solitaryness she turned to John and old Tom Kane with impulsive trust and affection.

She tried hard to be brave, but the days were long and the nights longer. The cook house bloomed with fresh roses every day, an excuse for her going down to talk with old Tom, and in the evening, when the shadows fell across the gulch, John and she would water the flowers together, and he would tell her of his life in college and in New York.

"I'd love to see New York!" she said a dozen times, and on each occasion John would smile at her and say, "You shall."

Neither of them realized that circumstances would shortly take them both, though separately, to New York, for there was piling up in a secret drawer in Wilkerson's desk letters written in a woman's script. Some of them in scented envelopes on embossed paper. Each one of them was signed "Jeann Darnell." When the seventh letter came the superintendent reread it many times:

Astor House, New York, May 15, 19—
Dear Harry—From what you say and from what I learn from George, I think that I would be willing to put up the money to buy control of your 'Master Key' mine, but you must be sure about this. I know that old Gallon made money out of it, but I'm also sure that he was concealing something, as you think. Make the mine worth while and—well, I remember my days in that camp—I'd like my revenge. George Everett will handle the stock and let it very quietly when you say the word. Don't let your ugly temper get away from you and look out for Dorr."

JEAN DARNELL.

"Now," thought Wilkerson exultantly, "I can put the screws on Dorr. I'll fire him."

At this moment the man he was thinking so bitterly of appeared, and Wilkerson, while his courage was still fresh, said insolently: "I see you are spending a good deal of time out of your office. The mine can't afford

such extravagance. I guess we'll have to have a new mining engineer. I've sent for one, so you better pack."

For the moment John did not speak. They confronted each other for a moment; then Dorr turned on his heel and walked off. As he did so he brushed into old Tom Kane.

"The miners won't stand any more of Wilkerson, and they are going to strike tonight, when the day shift comes off," Tom croaked. "Lots of them are packing their duds now to get out. D—n him; he has ruined little Ruthie's property!"

John looked out of the window and realized that the various groups of miners, tired, sullen, as if waiting for something, made an ugly picture.

"I'm afraid it's up to them, Tom," he said, a little huskily. "I have been discharged, and I am leaving myself tonight."

He was perfectly amazed at the effect of his words. Dropping the coffee-pot with a crash on the top of the range, Tom Kane dashed out of the door and into the nearest group of miners, gesticulating and laughing hysterically. He said two words and then rushed back, his bright eyes gleaming fiercely.

"That saves the mine for Ruthie, John," he gasped. "The miners were just going to quit quietly. Now they will make Wilkerson take you back, and you can make him straighten matters out with them."

He peered anxiously up into the young man's face. "You won't desert her, will you, John?"

With an inarticulate growl John swung out into the sunshine and bowed his way through the throngs of miners just coming off shift. Ahead of him he saw Wilkerson talking to an old miner, who seemed to be arguing earnestly. He saw the superintendent and the miner enter the office, and a moment later both appeared.

As John came to the office door he heard the sound of a scuffle within. He kicked open the first barrier and stood inside just in time to see Wilkerson draw a gun on the old miner.

"Drop that gun, you dog!" he bellowed, and with one leap was at Wilkerson's throat.

Wilkerson was no plucky in strength and as agile as a panther. He managed to land two stinging blows on John's eye before Dorr drove him up against the wall, laid his powerful hands on him and thrust him to the floor in absolute helplessness. His fist was lifted to give the final finishing blow when he caught sight of Ruth's white face. He jerked Wilkerson to his feet, flung him into the corner and strode silently out.

"John, John! What is the matter?" demanded Ruth.

"That bound in there discharged me! I am going to leave tonight."

Her eyes slowly filled with tears. "You are not going to leave 'The Master Key' mine, are you, John? And—"

Before he could answer her appeal in words there was a wild roar down the street and the tramp of booted feet.

"Get the dynamite and blow the fellow up!" bawled a couple of hoarse voices.

"Get a rope and hang him to the hoist!" yelled another. Then a full chorus of angry cries rose into the evening air and filled the valley with raucous sound.

Quickly John drew Ruth aside in the shelter of one of the cottages and said hurriedly: "This must be stopped, Ruth. I'll get out there and stop them."

Ruth's property was in peril. John's stentorian voice rang out across the throng: "Stop, men! Stop!" But he soon saw that the crowd was getting out of hand. He perceived three or four of the tunnel men racing down the hill to join in the frays. One of them, he was sure, had been to the powder house. He gritted his teeth and made his last appeal.

"Ruth—Ruth Gallon!" he called.

Doubtless none of the miners had noticed her presence, and when her slender figure emerged from a doorway, boldly yet modestly out toward the man who was trying to hold them in check, there was a dead silence. That silence was portentous. In it was decided the fate of "The Master Key."

It was broken by wild and tumultuous cheers as John lifted Ruth on the box, and she held out her slender arms in girlish entreaty to the men she knew so well.

Cowed, yet as ever alert to snatch at any opening, Wilkerson now came boldly on the scene. Just as he had bluffed his way many a time before, he now made a play on which he knew his own safety depended. He mounted on the box beside Ruth. "Miss Gallon has asked me to restore the former rate of wages!" he shouted. "It has been done."

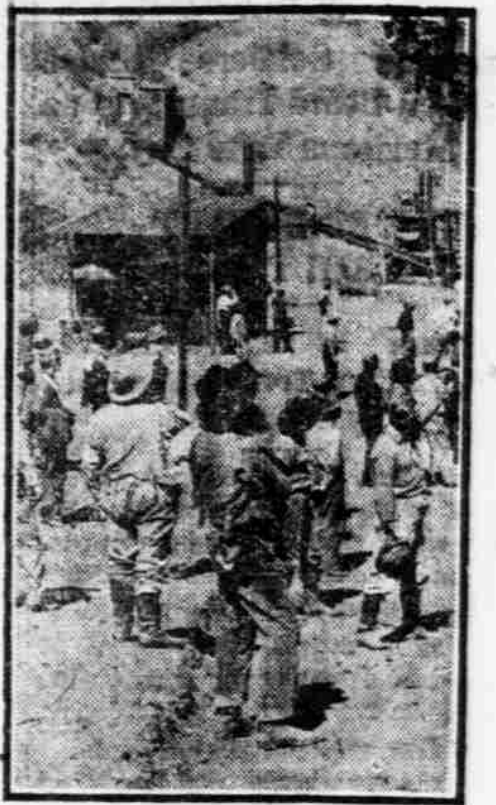
What meant that ominous silence? What more must he say to those faces upturned to his? "And I have reappointed John Dorr to run this mine," he muttered.

Possibly he hoped that those low, hoarse tones would not carry far, but attentive ears caught them up and knew their meaning.

Old Tom Kane came through the crowd, thrust Wilkerson off the box without ceremony and raised his crack-

ed voice in a yell that brought a perfect thunder of cheers from the miners. Without waiting to listen for more Wilkerson went away with as much bravado as he could muster to the office.

A Romance of Love, Life and Money



"Stop, men, stop!"

On his way he picked up his gun, which John had flung through the window, and thrust it in the bosom of his shirt, with a meaning glance backward at John Dorr, who was now helping Ruth through the crowds toward the bungalow, followed by a yelling, tramping, laughing, bellowing column of men.